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International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

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Comprehensive review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

Summaries of panel discussions

Note by the Secretariat

Addendum

Panel four
Addressing the emerging trends and social challenges for the sustainable development of small island developing States
(Tuesday, 11 January 2005, 5-7 p.m.)

Summary of discussion prepared by the Co-Chairpersons

1. Panel four addressed the topic of emerging trends and social challenges for the sustainable development of small island developing States. The panel was co-chaired by Marcus Bethel, Senator and Minister of Environment and Health of the Bahamas and Bruce Billson, Parliamentary Secretary, Foreign Affairs and Trade of Australia. Len Ishmael, Director General of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States, moderated the discussion. The four panellists were Greg Urwin, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum; Sonia Elliott, Liaison Officer of the New York Office of the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS, representing the Director of that Office, Desmond Johns; Curtis Ward, Adviser, Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee; and Rex Nettleford, Professor Emeritus, University of the West Indies.

2. The panellists' presentations elicited an interactive dialogue among representatives from Governments, organizations and civil society of both small island developing States, and other States. The panel's recommendations are being presented to the high-level round tables to stimulate the intergovernmental dialogue on practical measures to advance the small island developing States agenda, as part of the official report of the International Meeting.

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3. The panel discussion focused on a number of social challenges and emerging trends for the sustainable development of small island developing States. Participants emphasized that the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States is as relevant as ever in the context of those emerging trends.

4. Poverty alleviation continues to be a central challenge to the sustainable development of small island developing States even as progress is being made towards the goal to reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than $1 per day. Small island developing States have a high proportion of young people, are increasingly urbanized and are characterized by high population density relative to the availability of natural resources. Limited employment and tertiary education options, particularly for youth, continue to challenge small island developing States. The combination of high unemployment and urbanization is overwhelming service provision, and informal housing sectors and the incidence of real poverty are increasing.

5. Participants noted that the social impacts of globalization and trade liberalization are particularly apparent in small island developing States, as trade policies and tax regimes that do not take account of their special circumstances negatively affect the economy of local communities. Many small island developing States are facing the challenge of integrating local cultural norms and practices into governance frameworks and institutions inherited from the colonial period. International policies and regimes have forced many small island developing States to move from traditional resource economies to service economies. This change has had major transitional impacts on communities, labour and employment that should not be underestimated. Global markets do not accommodate social welfare, and small island developing States have had difficulty in providing adequate social safety nets. While local land ownership and access are fundamental to small island developing States' societies, global trading regimes make it increasingly difficult for them to restrict foreign ownership. In some cases, foreign direct investment, notably in the tourism sector, has increased the foreign ownership of land and further contributed to the erosion of community access to land ownership and natural resources. These factors compound the challenges faced by small island developing States in ensuring self-sufficiency and self-determination.

6. Short-sighted development plans that are not designed to protect the environment and natural resource base can also compromise the ability of small island developing States to protect the health and welfare of their communities. Small island developing States need to concentrate on developing niche markets. People, rather than the private sector, will be the engine of growth for small island developing States if they are adequately supported and resourced. The Governments of small island developing States should reflect this in policies and programmes, in a way that promotes the unique cultural assets of their communities and draws on self-determined needs rather than those imposed from the outside.

7. While HIV/AIDS is not an emerging trend, it was inadequately recognized as a development challenge 10 years ago. Nonetheless, HIV/AIDS is a grave and growing threat which is compounded by the frequent movement of people and persistent cultural taboos on the open discussion of sexual practices. HIV/AIDS is more than just a health concern; its impacts are all-pervasive and pose a continuing

development challenge. Lack of education and economic opportunities contributes to poor health behaviour and choices.

8. HIV/AIDS increasingly threatens the productive workforce of small island developing States and places further strains on already stretched health services. The younger, urban and most economically active age group is especially hard hit, with young women at particular risk. The Caribbean is the second-worst-affected region in the world. Vulnerability increases with a culture of denial, lack of access to health services and education, and high levels of poverty. Strong political commitment and leadership, coupled with a well-defined planning and delivery system, are critical. Solutions need to be targeted within national, regional and cultural contexts and properly funded.

9. HIV/AIDS is not the only major health issue facing small island developing States. Other chronic diseases and health conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, tuberculosis and malaria, are also of major concern and require similarly coordinated and integrated solutions.

10. Post-11 September 2001, the need to combat terrorism and the financing of terrorism has placed new demands on law enforcement institutions, resources and infrastructure. While small island developing States are willing partners in the international effort to improve global security and address terrorism, they face an uphill struggle to prioritize these issues over other pressing issues such as poverty alleviation, environmental degradation, natural disasters, disease pandemics and heavy debt burdens. The costs of not tackling internal and external security concerns are high in terms of the impact on financial, human and institutional resources. However, small island developing States are incurring further debts in their efforts to address security and terrorism issues, in particular with regard to the implementation of the United Nations resolution on security. There is an urgent need for capacity-building to ensure that small island developing States can address security needs without compromising their other development imperatives. This points to a need for institutionalized frameworks for cooperation and coordination among States to build capacity for national and global security. Participants noted that consideration should be given to a trust fund for global security, which could be established through the World Bank and administered through regional development banks.

11. Besides terrorism, other transnational crimes pose a significant challenge for small island developing States. They are particularly vulnerable as target locations for the conduct of transnational crime, including trafficking in people and drugs. Such crimes have a destabilizing effect on communities, affecting tourist economies and undermining governance.

12. Efforts for strengthening regional cooperation have increasingly proved useful in harmonizing frameworks for more integrated governance. Small island developing States are moving towards alliances, pooling resources and investing in regional infrastructure in an attempt to overcome many of their disadvantages, including limited economies of scale and the high costs associated with geographic isolation.

Possible actions for further consideration

13. Small island developing States have been working to integrate the Millennium Development Goals into their planning and development processes. People-centred, participatory approaches to development, particularly representation by women at all levels of governance, continue to be essential to the sustainable development of small island developing States. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami reinforced the importance of long-term sustainable development approaches that are based on real partnerships and mutual respect, rather than short-term handouts. The panel highlighted the following elements as possible actions for further consideration:

- Provide more international support, in partnerships with the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS, for programmes to combat HIV/AIDS
- Establish a trust fund for global security to be administered by the World Bank and regional development banks
- Strengthen community involvement in decision-making, planning and programme development, particularly on the part of women and youth
- Improve employment and education opportunities for the poor and disenfranchised to ensure economic and social sustainability and to create intellectual capital
- Call on Governments of small island developing States to ensure equitable distribution of income, job creation and job maintenance and to ensure the protection of workers' rights by ratifying the core International Labour Organization conventions
- Build institutional capacity to train local people so that they can develop niche markets in small island developing States, which will also help to retain jobs and support retirement options in the long term
- Take a more integrated approach to policies and programmes to address the many health issues, recognizing the broader implications for economic productivity and social cohesion
- Develop national plans of implementation to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and undertake a gender impact assessment of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States
- Establish an early warning system to monitor food security